Running Head: A YEAR IS NOT LONG ENOUGH

A Year Is Not Long Enough for Learning:

A Second Year Qualitative Study of Reading Comprehension

Margaret Lally Queenan

University of Bridgeport

Abstract

This qualitative study asked: “What happens when urban students are taught reading comprehension strategies?” Data comprised artifacts, field notes, and interviews. Analysis consisted of examining data for themes. Findings included the reality that the “Matthew Effect” (Stanovich, 1986)—where the rich in knowledge, vocabulary, and texts-read grow richer as new texts add knowledge, vocabulary, and textual experience while the poor grow poorer in that their limited knowledge, vocabulary, and textual experience lead to little gain—lives on. A year is not long enough for learning for such students; even the comprehension strategies advocated by the National Reading Panel (2000) do not help. Further research should examine the circumstances under which urban students build background knowledge, develop vocabulary, and become proficient in reading.

A Year Is Not Long Enough for Learning:
A Second Year Qualitative Study of Reading Comprehension

This paper reports on a second year qualitative study of urban fourth grade students' use of comprehension strategies. The study was illuminated by Fisher & Frey's (2008) concern that reading comprehension strategies, such as "building background and making connections, predicting and inferring, questioning, monitoring, summarizing and evaluating," are becoming "'curricularized'" (p. 16) with the consequence that comprehension strategies have replaced content at the center of instruction. Atwell (2007) theorized that students' aesthetic reading, or what Rosenblatt (1978) called a "lived through" experience, (p. 27) where readers are absorbed in the text, was intruded upon when students applied comprehension strategies. Taking these concerns into account, this study focused on students' ability to apply the reading comprehension strategies advocated by the National Reading Panel (2000), Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), Cunningham & Allington (2006), Calkins (2001), and others. Because Pressley (2000), the National Reading Panel (2000), and Brown (2008) lamented that most teachers do not teach the strategies, this second year of study focused on the question asked in the first year: "What happens when reading comprehension strategies are taught to urban fourth grade students?"

Research Design and Method

The author acted as a participant observer weekly for a school year in five fourth grade classrooms, teaching reading comprehension strategies to students while concurrently collecting and analyzing data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Strauss & Corbin (1998), there are three major components of

qualitative research: *data*; *procedures* which consist of "*conceptualizing and reducing* data…," and "*written and verbal reports"* (pp. 11-12), described below.

Data Collection

Data included artifacts, field notes, and interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Spradley, 1979; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Artifacts consisted of lesson plans that recorded the teaching of comprehension strategies; anchor charts (Harvey & Goodvis, 2007) that recorded the modeling of comprehension strategies; students' graphic organizers and note cards that showed application of the comprehension strategies; and students' writing that demonstrated learning of content and comprehension strategies.

Each week I conducted interviews with two or three students whose parents or guardians had given permission. In June, an interview helped me understand how much students had learned. Matthew (Students' names are pseudonyms), a high functioning student, was in Mr. Greene's class:

> Researcher: Can you tell me all the reading comprehension strategies you remember and how they help you?
>
> Matthew: Asking questions. You have to ask about something you don't know, mainly to get the main idea.
>
> Researcher: Can you give me an example?
>
> Matthew: What do I think will happen next—to this person or that person—almost like an inference.

Unfortunately, Mirabelle and Teresa, ESL students who had attended four different schools in different states, did not learn, as Matthew had, to apply comprehension strategies to texts:

Researcher: When I ask you to make an inference, what goes on in your head?

Mirabelle: What's that?

Teresa: Right now I'm just thinking about candy. The colors on the wall poster—all rainbows—make me think about candy.

Neither Teresa nor Mirabelle understood the comprehension strategy of making an inference in order to think about the text. I continued:

Researcher: Let's try another example: When the book (Nagda, 1997, unpaginated) says *A tamarin emerges from a crevice to warm itself in the morning sun*, why do you think he is warming himself in the morning sun?

Teresa: Maybe the hunters that go into the rainforest to gather animals and sell them on the Internet, maybe they don't go in that early. That's how come the animals go early so the hunters won't catch them and sell them. Just like the chimpanzees and gorillas that are extinct.

Here, Teresa is making an inference (that the hunters that gather animals to sell don't go into the rainforest early). Mirabelle was silent for several exchanges. Eventually, she entered the conversation and made an inference, as well, returning to my earlier question:

Mirabelle: I think he is trying to warm himself because you never know if there are animals that are bad and they take them somewhere and kill them. Then they get more and more and start killing them.

Researcher: Why are they killing them?

Mirabelle: Maybe they are a little hungry. They are trying to open them up and eat their meat. I'm looking up on the rainforest and I watched some movies and I saw them opening it up and taking their meat.

According to the *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, inferences are based upon evidence and the ability to reason. While the girls had made inferences based on information from movies, neither showed comprehension of the text, the purpose of applying comprehension strategies to one's reading (Pressley, 2000).

Instructional Procedures. Every four to six weeks, the teachers and I decided it was time to introduce a new comprehension strategy (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997) demonstrating each by directly explaining and modeling the strategies, providing guided practice, and involving students in "lively interpretive discussions of texts…" ((Pressley, 2000, p. 500).

The teachers and I invited students to share their learning via an assigned reading comprehension strategy role: "Visualizer" asked and answered senses-based questions; "Questioner" asked questions while reading; "Inferrer" used clues in the text to draw conclusions; "Connector" linked ideas from the text to experience; "Comprehension Monitor" suggested ways to move beyond trouble spots in the text; and "Synthesizer" combined all parts of the text into a new text. When we discovered that students weren't noting important ideas, we revised the graphic organizers to require students to list important information, then to think about it by applying their assigned comprehension strategy. For example, first Donna recorded important information about earthquakes:

> There are 100,000 earthquakes every year. Some earthquakes only last a minute or less. All buildings are destroyed. Most earthquakes are in the ocean which causes a tsunami. When they end things still get destroyed by fires. There are aftershocks, too.

Next, Donna recorded her thinking about the important information:

I wonder why earthquakes happen and how they destroy that much in not even half a minute (I think). One I learned about didn't last that long and there was 6 billion dollars of damage to pay, like 12,000 people died. There was an earthquake in San Francisco in like 1908 and that place has a lot of earthquakes because it's weak on the earth's crust.

Periodically, the teachers and I would have students write so we could assess their understanding of the topic and of comprehension strategies. For example, Korlissa wrote the following factual "book":

The Important Facts of Water

Water is one of our most valuable natural resources. When you take a shower, what do you use? My answer is water. Lots of people use water to wash their hair. Did you know snow flakes are frozen water? High in the mountains tiny drops of water have been carried up by the winds from the countryside below. As the air gets colder and colder, the little drops freeze and form snowflakes.

The Most Important Facts about Deserts

Did you know that deserts become hotter every year by….? Read on to find out your answer. As time passes by, the desert gets hotter every year because *el Nino* winter rainstorms come. Huge monsoon rainstorms used to come to the Mojave in ancient times.

Other students did not achieve Korlissa's level of success. For example, Mr. Brown, who had started building cars with his students and studying Newton's laws, wanted students to apply comprehension strategies to "force and motion," a topic in the

fourth grade science curriculum. Although the texts I downloaded from *Time for Kids* and other sites were at fourth grade level and students had had hands-on experience with the laws of motion by seeing them applied in the cars they had built, the articles were beyond most students' reach. Mr. Brown and I had to read the articles aloud and explain their meaning. Because Mr. Brown's class had a number of high needs special education students, we always had his entire class or an entire table practice one comprehension strategy together, so students would not be confused by their neighbors practicing a different strategy. Nevertheless, when Mr. Brown asked students later if they had understood, they assured him that they hadn't.

Data Analysis

As part of analysis, or what Strauss & Corbin (1998) call "*conceptualizing and reducing* data…," (pp. 11-12) data was coded to discover underlying themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Spradley, 1979). A doctoral student was trained to identify the use of comprehension strategies in students' written artifacts, and that data was entered into an Excel spread sheet to analyze students' learning of the strategies.

In addition, I examined data through the lens of Kamberelis and Dimitriadis's (2005) "Chronotope III: Skepticism, Conscientization & Praxis: Knowledge is socially constructed and inextricably linked to power relations…" (p. 28), which the authors base on Bahtkin (1981). In order to explore possible power relations, I examined data for six possible themes described by Spradley (1979), all of them linked to power relations: social conflict, cultural contradictions, informal techniques of social control, managing impersonal and social relationships, acquiring and maintaining status, and solving problems (pp. 200-201). For example, "social conflict" and "managing impersonal and

social relationships" are themes addressed in data on the difficulty of having students work productively in groups—as some students were able to work in the midst of disruption but "Ssh!" uttered by some indicated a preference for a lower noise volume than that engendered by the excitement of defending a point in a group. "Cultural contradictions" is a theme found in the data on the assimilation and achievement of ESL students—as ESL students were able to read the words but not able to understand the meaning of texts, or always able to apply reading comprehension strategies to texts, as the interview with Teresa and Mirabelle demonstrated. "Informal techniques of social control" is a theme that data on homogeneous grouping highlighted—as when Miss White pointed to the lack of time available for planning for differentiated lessons (Tomlinson, C. A., & Eidson, C. C., 2003) during heterogeneous grouping, in contrast to the ease with which p fully occurred when students were grouped homogeneously for reading and math. "Acquiring and maintaining status" is a theme also found in the data—as when students who were called out for an interview gained status among their peers who asked if they might come next time, or even this time. "Solving problems" is a theme that runs through the data—as when texts downloaded from the Internet were above students' reading level and so presented a problem the teachers and I could only solve by reading the text aloud and explaining it. On the other hand, students' lack of background knowledge and their struggle with English were problems that were never resolved, not even with the help of co-teachers in the classroom.

Findings

The research question, "What happens when urban fourth grade students are taught comprehension strategies?" had a variety of answers. One answer was that

teachers perceived that students' behavior was a major factor in their learning. One day in Mr. Greene's class students were more talkative than usual, I thought because I had asked them to share their ideas in groups. Mr. Greene thought the children were disrespectful. He thought that if the entire school focused on positive discipline, individual classrooms would be better managed. When I shared Linda Gambrell's (2008) suggestion that students be rewarded with time to read, Mr. Greene was sure that his students would laugh if they were rewarded with time to read. Another day, Mr. Brown had to "write up" two students who had punched each other. At the same time Miss White described silliness in reaction to the health teacher's information on bodily changes. Mr. Brown mentioned that the following year the whole school would be using a rules/rewards system accompanied by a traffic light warning system, so he was practicing. I wondered whether the system would be a source of inner conflict (Vacca, et. al., 2008) if the rules/rewards system didn't match a teacher's philosophy, as it didn't seem to match Mr. Brown's. Mr. Brown thought it might.

A related answer to the research question, "What happens when urban fourth grade students are taught comprehension strategies?" is that many astonishing students go unsung. When I shared this thought with teachers, they nodded agreement. For example, after Mr. Brown had taught his class Newton's laws of motions and I brought in a downloaded text about the Segway Scooter (El Nabli, 2001), students made a connection to all three of Newton's laws of motion and explained the laws competently. Sometimes, as I conjectured during one lunchtime conversation, the students had made greater strides than we realized because they didn't arrive in this country with background knowledge, even in their own language. Yet, the teachers had helped them learn.

A third answer to the research question is that learning to talk in groups is difficult for students. One reason might be that they have not been trained in younger grades to work in groups. Another reason might be that the culture of the school, whose younger grade classrooms were always quiet when I walked through the halls, prized quiet working rather than exuberant talking.

A fourth answer to the question is that it is difficult for teachers to plan together unless they are given time to do so. Teachers met every week during lunch during my visit, but this meant that the teachers could not do the tasks they normally reserved for lunchtime, such as telephoning a parent or completing an assessment-related task.

An important answer to the research question also concerns time: Testing reduced time for instruction. As soon as one test was over, it was time to prepare for the next. In January the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), 4-8 (Beaver & Carter) was given. In March it was time to prepare for the state test mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). In May it was time to retest for the Developmental Reading Assessment. At the end of May when the DRA had been completed, Mr. Greene read from an end of year to-do list that included testing Dolsch words assigned by the district and gathering writing prompts and theme tests from the reading series to send to the fifth grade teachers. In addition, each teacher had to write an Individual Reading Plan for every student not reading at grade level, which constituted 62 percent of students in Grade 4, according to the state assessment (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2008).

A related answer to the research question is that when teachers dwell on a curriculum topic, students benefit. For example, when Mr. Blue decided that his students

needed to spend more time studying volcanoes, he found volcano websites and printed material. He created a breathtaking K-W-L chart on craft paper he suspended from the pipes in the ceiling of the basement, where the fourth grade classrooms are located. One day when I arrived students had just finished creating papier-mâché volcanoes and adding high level questions to the KWL chart after reading articles on volcanoes. Before completing the study of volcanoes, Mr. Blue suggested that several students research and present additional information. Jewel described a 40,000 km "Ring of Fire" that possessed most of the volcanoes in the world and 90 percent of the earth's earthquakes. Tiger told the class that Hawaii's Manualoa, 60 by 30 miles, means "long mountain" and is the biggest volcano on earth. Higher than the clouds, it is a shield volcano with shallow sloping sides, formed by lava that hardened when deep underwater volcanoes erupted. Maureen waited to share her research until the assistant principal arrived to hear Maureen tell about Mt. St. Helena where a powerful earthquake came as a surprise in 1980, blew off the top of the volcano, and eliminated vegetation for seven years. Mr. Blue's intense and extended focus on one topic gave his students time to explore the content. A similar expertise developed in classrooms when teachers maintained a focus on the rainforest for several months and in classrooms where students focused longer than usual on the topic of changes in the surface, helping me realize that students who focus on one topic for longer than is usually spent are the ones who learn the most about the content. Time, not comprehension strategies, with or without comprehension strategies made the difference.

Discussion

As Atwell (2007) and Fisher & Frey (2008) pointed out, it is content that engages students—and in this study—the length of time spent on that content. Dolores, for

example read even when she was not supposed to, as her answer to my question about hoe much she read shows:

> Researcher: Do you read often?
>
> Dolores: Every day a lot. No one catches me. I like reading. I have a lot of chapter books or if it's not chapter books it's a really long book. I usually read in the morning and in the afternoon. I carry it to my bed and get my flashlight and I start reading. Usually my mother catches me. It's like she has super vision. She'll say, "Which light is on?" I'll switch off the light. She'll go back to sleep. She'll wake up and say, "Why are you reading a book at this time? You have school tomorrow." I'll say, "Can I just read this paragraph?" She'll say, "No, go to sleep."

Dolores, not surprisingly, was not one of the students who read below grade level or had a continuum of difficulties that prevented her learning of content. Stanovich (1986) described a "Matthew Effect" where the rich in knowledge, vocabulary, and texts-read, like Dolores, grow richer as new texts add knowledge, vocabulary, and textual experience while the poor, like 62 percent of the students in fourth grade (Connecticut Department of Education, 2008) grow poorer because limited knowledge, vocabulary, and textual experience lead to little gain in any of those areas. The comprehension strategies I taught, as advocated by the National Reading Panel, did not move most students to grade level in reading. Only 38 percent of the fourth grade students in Striving Elementary School (a pseudonym) achieved proficiency in reading on the No Child Left Behind assessment (Connecticut Department of Education, 2008).

Conversations with knowledgeable adults might help students learn the reading strategies of proficient adults (Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, & Fingeret, 2007). Interaction with mentors who take students under their wings might help students develop as learners (Tatum, 2005). Experiences that build background knowledge and, as a result, vocabulary might help build necessary skills (Marzano, 2005). The students of Striving Elementary School need more than the reading comprehension strategies advocated by the National Reading Panel (2000) to become competent readers. A year is not long enough. An entire elementary school education might not be long enough, unless circumstances change.

Implications for Further Research

For the students in Striving Elementary School for whom a year was not long enough to progress to grade level in their reading ability, even with the help of a college professor who modeled reading comprehension strategies weekly, the following research questions might be profitably pursued: 1) Under what circumstances do urban fourth grade students build background knowledge? 2) Under what circumstances do urban fourth grade develop vocabulary? 3) Under what circumstances do urban fourth grade become proficient in reading?

References

Atwell, N. (2007). *The reading zone: How to help kids become skilled, passionate, habitual, critical readers.* New York: Scholastic.

Beaver, J., & Carter, M. (2007). *The Developmental Reading Assessment: DRA2 Grades 4-8*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Brown, R. (2008). The road not yet taken: A transactional strategies approach to comprehension instruction. *The Reading Teacher 6* (7), 538-547.

Calkins, L. M. (2001). *The art of teaching reading.* New York: Longman.

Connecticut State Department of Education. (2008). No Child Left Behind. State, District, and School NCLB Results. Retrieved on 10/30/08 from http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/index.htm.

Cunningham, P. M., & Allington, R. L. (2006). *Classrooms that work: They can all read and write* (4th Ed.). Boston: Pearson.

El Nabli, D. (2001). Make Way for Segway! *Time for Kids.* Retrieved on 4/14/08 from http://www.timeforkids.com/TFG/kids/news/story/0,28277,187023,00.html.

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2008). What does it take to create skilled readers? Facilitating the transfer and application of literacy strategies. *Voices from the Middle 15* (4), 16-22.

Gambrell, L. (2008). Presentation to the Connecticut Association for Reading Research.

Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of cultures. In *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays by Clifford Geertz, pp. 3-30.* New York: Basic Books.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction.

Guthrie, J. T., & Wigfield, A. Engagement and motivation in reading. In M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research* (Vol. 3, pp. 403-422). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erhlbaum.

Harvey, S., & Goudvis, A. (2007). *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension for understanding and engagement.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Kamberelis, G., & Dimitriadis, G. (2005). *On qualitative inquiry: Approaches to language and literacy research.* New York: Teachers College Press and National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy (NCRLL).

Keene, E. O., & Zimmermann, S. (1997). *Mosaic of thought: Teaching comprehension in a reader's workshop.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Marzano, R. J. (2005). *Building background knowledge for academic achievement: Research on what works in schools.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read—An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction, report of the subgroups.* Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Nagda, A. W. (1997). *Canopy crossing: A story of an Atlantic rainforest.* Norwalk, CT: Soundprints.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1325 (2002).

Pressley, M. (2000). What should comprehension instruction be instruction of? In M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research, Vol. 3* (pp. 545-561. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Pressley, M., Mohan, L., Raphael, L. M., & Fingeret, L. (2007). How does Bennett Woods Elementary School produce such high reading and writing achievement? *Journal of Educational Psychology 99* (2*),* 221-240.

Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work.* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew Effects in Reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *21*, 360-407. Accessed on 7/28/08 from http://www.jstor.org/stable/747612.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tatum, A. W. (2005). *Teaching reading to Black adolescent males: Closing the achievement gap.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Tomlinson, C. A., & Eidson, C. C. (2003). *Differentiation in practice: A resource guide for differentiating curriculum.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum

Vacca, J. A., Vacca, R. T., Gove, M. K., Burkey, L. C., Lenhart, L. A., & McKeon, C. A. (2008). *Reading and learning to read.* (7th ed.). Boston: Pearson.